

Deadline nears to destroy mums in fight against white rust disease

By LANE WALLACE

STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — Dave Moeller knows chrysanthemums are "very popular and very colorful." He also knows they must be destroyed.

"We've got to get rid of all of them" if the white rust disease that's hit Santa Cruz County in the last two

years is to be eliminated, said Moeller, the county's agricultural commissioner.

This year, a stronger stand is being taken: There's an order that residents from Santa Cruz to Watsonville destroy all their mums by

Sunday and not plant any more until next June.

State inspectors will be coming in within a week or two, going door-to-door to tell people to destroy the plants. The inspectors will not go into the back yards of people who are not home, Moeller said.

White rust, a fungus, appeared in the Pajaro Valley a couple of years ago and wiped out tens of thousands of plants at one nursery. Nurseries are under strict monitoring and can continue to grow mums while the ban on residential growing continues.

The nurseries that grow locally must sell them out of county.

Residents "can't have them here," and "you can't bring them in" from elsewhere, Moeller said.

The number of white rust cases in home gardens has increased in the last two years, Moeller said. Without a plan to eliminate it, Moeller said, the white rust would become more and more prevalent.

"We're so close to nailing this stuff," Moeller said of the effort against white rust, emphasizing that program doesn't involve pesticides.

White rust fungus can travel through the air, or by

contact with plants.

No fancy disposal methods are needed. Those with plants should put them in a plastic bag and seal it before discarding it, "just like any other kind of trash," Moeller said.

Those with limited disposal capacity can leave their mums in bags next to the garbage cans without being charged extra. The free service ends Saturday.

Moeller said he's heard "Mum's the word" jokes too many times. "We've got eight months to come up with a better slogan," he said.

Moeller said one person said, "When mums are outlawed, only outlaws will have mums."

Mum hot line

A "mum hot line" has been established by the Santa Cruz County Agricultural Commissioner for questions and information about the mum eradication.

The number is 454-3300. Residents are asked not to call any other numbers about the mums.